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Oceanside working to develop community programs

By: DAVID STERRETT - Staff Writer

News

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OCEANSIDE --- The city hasn't launched any major violence-prevention initiatives since the Dec. 20 fatal shooting of police Officer Dan Bessant, but Oceanside leaders say they are working behind the scenes to develop programs to reduce crime and gangs.

City officials said last week that they'd been reaching out to residents in a series of meetings for information on their experiences with violence and to discuss ways to deter children from getting involved with gangs.

"Oceanside is a safe place to live, work and play," said Margery Pierce, the city's director of neighborhood services. "But there is an expectation that we'll continue to do more after the fatal (shooting of Bessant.)"

While crime decreased more than 12 percent last year in Oceanside, Bessant's killing in a notoriously rough neighborhood in northeast Oceanside near the back gate to Camp Pendleton raised concerns about gangs in the city.

Two teenage suspects arrested in connection with the shooting are gang members, according to prosecutors.

Police statistics show that about 1,100 gang members or associates make up 12

gangs in Oceanside.

In the days after Bessant's death, city leaders vowed to dedicate more money and time to reducing gang violence in Oceanside.

The Police Department has taken the lead by increasing the presence of officers in

leaders said. In addition, council members and staffers said they had attended numerous meetings

gang areas and working to develop more relationships within those communities, city

about the issue with various community activists, religious leaders, nonprofit organizations, prosecutors and police officers.

Pierce said many organizations, such as the Vista Community Clinic, Boys & Girls Club and North County Lifeline, offer gang-prevention or youth programs, but that the city needs to determine all of the options available to residents.

Meeting with residents

Earlier this month, the City Council unanimously approved hiring consultants to study all of the programs offered in the area where Bessant was killed.

"That is such a critical piece of the whole thing," Councilwoman Esther Sanchez said of the study, expected to be done in about three months.

Sanchez and other city leaders said the study will provide a clear picture of what additional programs or policies the city might implement in the area.

In the meantime, Sanchez said, she has held several meetings with community leaders to find out what type of programs could benefit the northeastern part of the city.

"This has to come from the community," Sanchez said. "No one organization or effort will do it."

Sanchez, who is a public defender, said she was working with judges and prosecutors on the possibility of creating a juvenile court program to deal with gang issues.

Councilman Jack Feller said he was trying to meet with pastors because he wants them to tell their congregations not to tolerate "violence and the thug mentality."

"We are just getting rolling," Feller said.

While Oceanside is still studying possible options, Fresno, a city in central California with 465,000 residents, launched a \$1 million gang prevention program in August run by its Police Department.

The program provides educational services, job skills, tattoo removal, social skills and case management to help gang members leave the lifestyle.

Fresno Mayor Alan Autry said in a phone interview Friday that the program is "working beyond our expectations."

"You need to have the political courage to invest strongly in prevention and intervention programs," Autry said. "You have to do it to make the streets safe."

In the works

Mayor Jim Wood said city staffers are starting and congressmen for funding during a trip to Washington, D.C., this month.

Wood and the council also held a special meeting this month at the Melba Bishop Recreation Center in northeastern Oceanside to hear residents' concerns about gangs or crime.

"People got a chance to talk and really vent," Wood said.

After hearing from residents, the mayor said he plans to propose that the city assign a staffer to coordinate all the community programs so they could better work together to reach more people.

Councilman Rocky Chavez, who has been part of a group of community leaders meeting monthly on the best way to tackle the gang problem, said he wants the city to create a permanent committee to allocate money and programs in the community.

He said the commission would especially be looking for programs aimed at keeping children off the streets, out of gangs and out of trouble.

"We have to engage all levels of the community," Chavez said. "We could probably move more quicker if we were more unified, but that is the reality of the community."

All of the council members have met with different contacts and friends within the community about the issue, leading Councilman

Jerry Kern to say, "I think we are all much better educated on the issues.

"We need some long-range solutions, and this isn't going to be something that is flashy," Kern said. "The council needs to work together to bring everyone together."

But Pierce said it's a benefit that the council and staffers use all their contacts and reach out to residents they are close to.

She said that even though the council members and city leaders aren't meeting with the same groups, "they all have the same

"We want Oceanside to be safe for everyone," Pierce said. "The message doesn't change."

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Eleven-year-old Steve Godinez winds-up before delivering the ball in a game of Nation-ball at the Crown Heights community resource center located in Oceanside Thursday. JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE Staff Photographer

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